



DINING REVIEW: Grizzly Grill at Cheyenne Mountain Zoo

[NATHANIEL GLEN](#)

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In the past, if you wanted to get a snack while visiting a zoo, you ended up envying the animals.

The monkeys got fresh fruit and greens. The lions got meat. Even the giraffes got whole-grain crackers.

And the humans? They were relegated to a realm of leathery soft pretzels, frozen burgers and bad pizza, all tailored to a 6-year-old's palate and the preparation skills of seasonal workers.

That changed this spring with the extreme makeover of the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo's Grizzly Grill. It has food you actually want to eat and enough variety to keep mamma bear, papa bear and the cubs happy.

In one corner, hungry zoogoers can order zesty but light chicken or mushroom teriyaki rice bowls, tossed with fresh snow peas and peppers. Just next door, you can get a salad — a real salad — including daily specials offering enticing toppings like roasted sweet potatoes and parsnips.

Just down from that, freshly made New York-style pizzas come steaming out of the oven.

And it doesn't end there. The next counter over serves up burgers and hotdogs for the kids, but also has crazy-good daily specials you would never expect to find at the zoo, such as lamb sliders with a South African herb-yogurt sauce and freshly-made plantain salsa.

The hot, crispy Parmesan-garlic fries you can get on the side are not to be missed.

It is all the work of Beau Green, the zoo's new chef, who got the town's attention this year by walking away with the top prizes at our biggest local culinary throw-down, the Colorado Springs Choral's Chefs' Gala.

His Wild Boar tenderloin and Fig-Bacon Ragu with Garlic-Parsnip Purée and Sautéed Brussels Sprouts won Best Entree and Best of Show. You won't find that kind of haute cuisine at the zoo lunch room, but you will find a lot of stuff that is honest-to-god worth eating — something I have never said before about anything at the zoo. (And if you go there for a special event, it can get pretty haute.)

Green makes sure the classic kid favorites make an appearance. You want nachos? You got nachos. Soft-serve ice cream and plain cheese pizza fill out the roster. But there are also chicken quesadillas with green chiles and the cheese pizza is actually good enough to eat. The dough is fresh and chewy. The sauce appears to be homemade and the pies come out of a true pizza oven whose scorching-high temperatures ensure that the cheese is bubbly and the crust has a thin, crisp veneer.

Not everything is perfect. On a recent very busy day, I got the sense that the kitchen crew was still trying to perfect serving good food fast.

The burger line backed up. People were grumbling and jostling like hungry wildebeests.

The daily specials still seem to be in the experimental phase.

The sweet potatoes and parsnips on the special salad were so finely diced that they instantly sifted to the bottom of the bowl. Julienned strips might have stayed afloat better. The plantain salsa on the otherwise exceptional lamb sliders was starchy and dull. It looked like mango salsa, but had none of the acidic bite.

The soft-serve ice cream at Grizzly Grill is of the healthy sort — more ice than cream. I appreciate the nod toward combating childhood obesity. But, come on, is ice cream really the place to start?

Those minor problems, though, don't amount to a mole hill. The prices at the grill are surprisingly fair — a bit higher than you might find in town but not bad compared with other concessions that serve captive audiences. All and all, the grill is a grrr-eat addition to the zoo, and one more reason to spend the whole day there.

GRIZZLY GRILL

4 STARS out of 5

(Grrrr-eat)

Address: 4250 Cheyenne Mountain Zoo Road (next to the monkey house; zoo admission is required)

Contact: 475-9555; cmzoo.org

Hours: 10 a.m. until the close of the zoo (varies) daily

Entrees: \$3.50-\$13

Vegetarian: Plenty

Alcohol: No (except during special events)

Credit cards: Yes

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